CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTION

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WORSHIP SERVICE

LOST IN THE WILDERNESS TO FIND A SELF

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

SCRIPTURE

EXODUS 3:1-6

LUKE 4:1-11

"JESUS...WAS LED BY THE SPIRIT IN THE WILDERNESS..."
-LUKE 4:1 (NRSV)

THERE IS, I SUBMIT, AN ELEMENTAL RHYTHM WHICH MOVES US FROM LIFE AT ITS BUSIEST, [redacted], NOISIEST AND MOST HECTIC TO SOLITUDE, TO AN INTERIOR LIFE OF SILENCE, EMPTINESS AND ALONENESS.

THERE IS FURTHER, I SUBMIT, A SENSE IN WHICH THE HUMAN SOUL, THE SPIRIT, THE SELF, IF YOU WILL, IS NURTURED, GROWS, IS DISCOVERED, IN THE SILENT EMPTINESS;

AND IF LIFE DOES NOT AFFORD SILENT EMPTINESS, SOME WILDERNESS, YOU AND I ARE IMMEASURABLY POORER.

ANNIE DILLARD IS A WRITER WHO LIVES IN THE CITY AND LOVES IT, BUT WHO DOES HER BEST WORK SOMEWHERE ELSE. PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK IS A BOOK-LENGTH JOURNAL OF HER REFLECTIONS AT HER WILDERNESS RETREAT IN THE MOUNTAINS OF VIRGINIA. DILLARD'S DESCRIPTIONS OF TREES AND INSECTS, TINKER CREEK AND HER DAILY WALKS CONSTITUTE SOME VERY GOOD WRITING AND SATISFYING READING. BUT WHAT FASCINATES ME MOST, IN ADDITION TO THE FACT THAT SHE GREW UP IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA AS I DID, AND REMEMBERS PITTSBURGH IN THE SAME WAY I DO FROM EXCITING ANNUAL TRIPS TO SEE THE PIRATES PLAY, IN ADDITION TO THAT, I AM INTRIGUED BY THE WRITER'S INTENTIONAL MOVING FROM CITY TO

WILDERNESS AND HOW FULL OF CREATIVITY AND ENERGY THAT RHYTHM IS FOR HER.

FROM CREEKSIDE IN VIRGINIA SHE WROTE (SOMETHING THOSE OF US WHO LIVE IN TH[redacted]CE WILL UNDERSTAND):

"I REMEMBER WHAT THE CITY HAS TO OFFER; HUMAN COMPANIONSHIP, MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL AND A CLATTER OF QUICKENING STIMULUS LIKE A RUSH FROM STRONG DRUGS THAT LEAVES YOU DRAINED. I REMEMBER HOW YOU BIDE YOUR TIME IN THE CITY, AND THINK, IF YOU STOP TO THINK, 'NEXT YEAR, I'LL START LIVING, NEXT YEAR I'LL START MY LIFE.'" [PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK, 81]

WHEN SHE NEEDS TO WRITE A BOOK OR WANTS TO WRITE A BOOK, SHE MOVES AWAY FROM THE BUSYNESS AND NOISE OF THE CITY TO TINKER CREEK, OR TO A SHED BEHIND A HOUSE ON CAPE COD... SOMEWHERE AWAY, NOT PERMANENTLY, BUT REGULARLY. AND WHAT

busy urban neighborhood

Urban life — much of modern life — calls at us so quickly. we are not even aware of living th

HAPPENS THERE IS A DEEPENING, A RENEWED AWARENESS OF WHO SHE IS AND WHAT HER LIFE IS ABOUT, A KIND OF PERIODIC SELF-REDISCOVERY, THE HAPPY RESULT OF WHICH IS SOME VERY GOOD WRITING.

ONE TIME JESUS SPENT TIME IN THE WILDERNESS. MOST OF THE SERMONIC ATTENTION TO THIS TEXT REVOLVES AROUND WHAT HAPPENED TO JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS, HOW HE STRUGGLED WITH TEMPTATION AND OVERCAME IT. I CONFESS, HOWEVER, THAT THE THREE MORAL DILEMMAS HE CONFRONTED IN THE DESERT NEVER SEEMED VERY RACY TO ME, AND BARELY QUALIFIED AS TEMPTATION. TO TURN STONES INTO LOAVES OF BREAD, TO ACHIEVE POLITICAL POWER IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH A LITTLE JUSTICE AND SANITY IN THE WORLD, TO EARN PUBLIC ATTENTION IN ORDER TO DEMONSTRATE CREDIBILITY AS A SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY... THE MORE YOU THINK ABOUT IT, THE BETTER THESE ALTER-

NATIVES SOUND, FRANKLY, SOMETHING LIKE AN ACTION PLAN DEVISED BY A GROUP OF PRESBYTERIANS AT A LONG RANGE PLANNING MEETING.

So I've always found myself wondering what the real issue is here, and what temptation means if the result of succumbing is not moral decadence.. if doing a good thing, like feeding hungry people - for the wrong reason - negates the good. And I've concluded that what is going on in this little story of Jesus in the wilderness is not simple at all: that it has to do with his very basic identity, his understanding of himself and the purpose of his life. The real struggle here is something which is a priority for every one of us, to find a self with no compromises, that rock-bottom integrity in Shakespeare:

This above all:
5 to thine own
self be true ..

"THIS ABOVE ALL: TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE."

I'VE CONCLUDED THAT THE MOST INTERESTING THING OF ALL ABOUT THIS STORY IS IN THE VERY FIRST SENTENCE, NAMELY THAT THE SPIRIT LED HIM INTO THE WILDERNESS. HE ~~NEEDED TO BE THERE.~~ HE WAS FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND THE ~~SPIRIT LED HIM INTO THE WILDERNESS;~~ THE SPIRIT KNEW WHO HE WOULD MEET THERE AND THERE WAS IMPORTANT AND HARD WORK TO DO BEFORE HE BEGAN THE ADVENTURES OF HIS ADULT LIFE.

WILDERNESS IS AN IMPORTANT BIBLICAL WORD AND CONCEPT. MOSES ENCOUNTERED THE VOICE IN THE BURNING BUSH JUST WEST OF THE WILDERNESS.

IT'S WHY WE HEAD OUT FOR MICHIGAN AND WISCONSIN, TO MOUNTAINS AND SEA-SHORE, TO GET IN TOUCH WITH A PRIMAL WORLD, A WORLD YOU CAN TOUCH AND SEE AND

it's why you all went as Mr. Brattin so eloquently put it

FEEL AND SMELL - AS IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN, A WORLD OF GRANDEUR AND MAJESTY, A WORLD SO BEAUTIFUL, ONLY ART AND MUSIC AND POETRY CAN APPROACH AN ADEQUATE EXPRESSION OF IT. . .

THEODORE ROETHKE:

"I WOULD UNLEARN THE LINGO OF EXASPERATION, ALL

THE DISTORTIONS OF MALICE AND HATRED . . .

I WOULD BELIEVE MY PAIN;

AND THE EYE QUIET ON THE ROSE.

I WOULD DELIGHT IN MY HANDS,

THE BRANCH ~~SINGING~~ STINGING...

I LONG FOR THE IMPERISHABLE QUIET AT THE HEART OF FORM...

THIS AMBUSH, THIS SILENCE."

[~~THE LONGING, THEODORE ROETHKE, IN RAINES, GOING HOME, P 571.~~

ANNIE DILLARD DESCRIBES IT THIS WAY:

"SOMETHING PUMMELS US, SOMETHING BARELY SHEATHED.

POWER BROODS AND LIGHTS. WE'RE PLAYED ON LIKE A PIPE; OUR BREATH IS NOT OUR OWN." [P. 13]

That's what happens when we go to the wilderness. But that is not what JESUS DOESN'T FIND GOD IN THIS WILDERNESS. WHAT JESUS DISCOVERS IS A SELF. AND THE WAY LUKE TELLS IT, GOD ALMOST INTENTIONALLY STAYS OUT OF THE PICTURE SO THAT JESUS CAN FIND HIS SELF ALONE. THIS WILDERNESS IS ABANDONED BY GOD, NOT OUT OF MEANNESS OR CALLOUSNESS, BUT PRECISELY SO THE WORK OF SELF-DISCOVERY CAN GO ON, BECAUSE SELF-DISCOVERING CANNOT HAPPEN IN THE PRESENCE OF YOUR PARENTS.

PSYCHOLOGY, PSYCHIATRY, PSYCHOTHERAPY KNOWS THAT. IN HIS POPULAR BOOK, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT, THE LATE BRUNO BETTLEHEIM OBSERVED:

"IN MANY FAIRY TALES BEING PUSHED OUT OF

HOME STANDS FOR HAVING TO BECOME ONE-SELF. SELF-REALIZATION REQUIRES LEAVING THE ORBIT OF HOME, AN EXCRUCIATING, PAINFUL EXPERIENCE FRAUGHT WITH MANY PSYCHOLOGICAL DANGERS." [P. 79]

WHEN YOU TAKE THE TIME TO EXPLORE YOUR OWN SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IT IS NOT UNCOMMON TO DISCOVER THAT ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT DAYS IN YOUR LIFE WAS THE OCCASION WHEN YOUR PARENTS, IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, PUSHED YOU OUT, OR DROPPED YOU OFF IN SOME GOD-FORSAKEN WILDERNESS - LIKE A SUMMER CAMP, OR TURNED YOU OVER TO A STRANGER -LIKE A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER, OR ABANDONED YOU IN FRONT OF A COLLEGE DORM, OR PUT YOU ON A TRAIN AND CHEERFULLY WAVED GOODBYE.

THE SPIRIT LED JESUS INTO THAT WILDERNESS. HE WOULD NOT HAVE VOLUNTEERED TO GO ON HIS OWN. IT WAS NOT A PARTICULARLY COMFORTABLE PLACE TO BE.

I remember it vividly - they took me in a 1951 Dodge. moved me & then they drove off & left me there.

BUT IT WAS TIME. IT WAS TIME FOR HIM TO DECIDE WHO HE WAS AND WHAT HE WAS GOING TO DO WITH THE REST OF HIS LIFE. HIS SELF WAS FORGED IN THE WILDERNESS, ALONE.

MY SUGGESTION IS THAT IF THERE IS NO WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE IN YOUR LIFE, NO SOLITUDE OF THE HEART, YOU ARE MISSING SOMETHING.

YOU MAY BE MISSING CREATIVITY WHICH YOU HAVE NEVER RECOGNIZED IN YOURSELF. ARTISTS AND MUSICIANS AND WRITERS MUST LOOK inside, BEFORE ALL ELSE. ANNIE DILLARD WROTE A BOOK ABOUT HER CRAFT, THE WRITING LIFE, IN WHICH SHE TELLS ABOUT WHERE SHE WRITES:

"APPEALING WORKPLACES ARE TO BE AVOIDED. ONE WANTS A ROOM WITH NO VIEW, SO IMAGINATION CAN MEET MEMORY IN THE DARK." [P. 26]

AND RANIER MARIA RILKE IN HIS FAMOUS LETTERS TO A YOUNGER POET, ADVISED HIS JUNIOR COLLEAGUE TO STOP FRANTICALLY CRANKING OUT POETRY SIMPLY TO SEND IT TO PUBLISHERS.

"YOU ARE LOOKING OUTWARD," HE ADVISED. "THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY - GO INTO YOURSELF."

YOU MAY BE MISSING YOUR SPIRITUAL SELF IF YOU DO NOT GO INTO THE WILDERNESS. JESUS WENT OFF BY HIMSELF TO PRAY, AND WHEN HE ADVISED OTHERS, IT WAS TO GO INTO A CLOSET - INTO SILENCE AND ALONENESS. OUR PRAYING IS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY TALKING, THINKING UP THINGS TO SAY TO GOD. BUT THERE IS A PRAYING THAT IS LISTENING, A BEING SILENT BEFORE GOD, A SPEECHLESS, VOICELESS ATTENTIVENESS.

THE LATE THOMAS MERTON, TRAPPIST MONK, WHO THOUGHT AND WROTE SO PERCEP-

Henri Nouwen - I think says prayer is useless being in God's presence.

TIVELY ABOUT SPIRITUALITY DESCRIBED THIS PHENOMENON:"

IT IS IN DEEP SOLITUDE THAT I FIND THE GENTLENESS WITH WHICH I CAN TRULY LOVE MY BROTHERS. THE MORE SOLITARY I AM, THE MORE AFFECTION I HAVE FOR THEM." [IN MERTON'S JOURNAL, THE SIGN OF JONAS, 1/2/50]

AND IF YOU HAVE EVER EXPERIENCED THE INTIMACY OF LOVE, YOU KNOW THE RIGHTNESS OF THE POET RILKE'S UNFORGETTABLE OBSERVATION:

"LOVE CONSISTS IN THIS, THAT TWO SOLITUDES PROTECT AND BORDER AND SALUTE EACH OTHER."

[LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET, P. 59]

Conc.

GOD SEEMS TO ABANDON JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS. THAT'S HOW IT FEELS SOMETIMES. THE TRUTH IS THAT IT IS PRECISELY WHEN WE FEEL ABANDONED, THAT WE BEGIN TO DISCOVER WHO WE ARE, THAT WE FIND A self

SELF; A SELF - LOVED INTO BEING BY GOD, A SELF - CAPABLE OF LOVING OTHERS, A SELF - CREATED FOR FULL AND JOYFUL LIFE. SO MAY YOU FIND, OR MAY THE SPIRIT LEAD YOU... INTO SOME WILDERNESS, SOME SOLITUDE OF HEART... THIS AMBUSH... THIS SILENCE.

AMEN.

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GOD OF ALL GENTLENESS, LEAD US ONCE AGAIN INTO THE WILDERNESS, TO CONTEND WITH TEMPTATION, TO KNOW OURSELVES, AND TO LISTEN FOR YOUR WORD OF LOVE AND COURAGE, IN JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.

AMEN.